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ABSTRACT

The historical development and evolution of broadcasting in Thailand, from its beginning in 1919, is narrated. Governmental control of broadcasting is discussed briefly, and the development of Southeast Asia's first television station, Thai Television Channel 4, is also surveyed. Today, radio broadcasting in Thailand utilizes A.M., F.M., and F.M. stereo multi-plex, and over 150 wavelengths have been allocated to stations broadcasting in eight languages. Television, too, has grown tremendously, and a 1967 survey shows a viewing audience of 2 million with over 250,000 television sets in the country. (JK)

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SOUTHEAST ASIAN BROADCASTING: THE EMERGENCE OF THAILAND

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Although Thailand is still considered an "underdeveloped" nation, it has made great strides in developing a system of broadcasting which has assisted in the economic growth of the Thai nation and is setting an example for all of Southeast Asia.

This paper will relate the historical development of broadcasting in Thailand, briefly discuss governmental control of broadcasting and look at the development of Southeast Asia's first television station, Thai Television Channel 4.

The First 50 Years

It was 1919 when the concept of broadcasting was first introduced to Thailand (then known as Siam).[1] It was in that year that the first official land-based station was established in the capital, Bangkok. The King, commemorating the occasion, sent his brother His Royal Highness Krom Luant Lopbures Ramet a message reading, "Greetings to you on this which will be one of the most important days in our history."[2] The broadcast from the Hotel Phya Thai in Bangkok marked the official commencement of voice broadcasting when the King addressed his nation through the facilities of an A.C. Phillips transmitter on 350 meters with a power output of 2500 watts.[3]

In 1931 broadcasting was established by the government as a public service. Shortly thereafter, through sheer coincidence, the world was drawn to an awareness of that historic introduction. In the spring of 1931, the King of Thailand sailed from Bangkok to New York City to undergo eye surgery. During his convalescence, the King indicated a desire to be entertained by Thai music. The Royal Advisors commissioned John D. Reid, an American, to engineer the reception of a special broadcast originating from the newly established station HSIRJ in Bangkok, 8000 miles away.[4] On May 10, 1931 the feat was accomplished; a borrowed 14 tube Nordon-Hauck receiver picked up the signal of a special Thai music broadcast.[5] The New York Times reported the event as follows:

> The program continued for two hours. Part of the program consisted of news items from Bangkok, but these were not received satisfactorily... The program was carried on a wave length of 16.9 meters, and came over the North Pole, that being the shortest route from Bangkok to Westchester, New York.[6]

Not only was the King's eye operation a success, but the use of radio broadcasts from Thailand were cited throughout the American Press. On May 17th the Times noted the accomplishments of the past week by mentioning that "thousands of ham operators has also joined in the activities."[7]

These first transcontinental broadcasts instilled in the Thai government an awareness of the potential of overseas transmissions. Although not a commercial venture, the Ministry saw a means of extending the Thai influence in international circles. In 1938 the first major step in extending this influence took place on October 20th when the government inaugurated the Thai Overseas Broadcasting Service.[8] The original output was 10 kilowatts but as other nations began to increase power and international frequencies became more crowded, the power of the Thai Overseas Service was increased to 100 kilowatts operating on two frequencies. Both frequencies

with the increased power were capable of around the world transmission. Since the transmissions could now be heard far beyond the Thai nation, a multilingual programming policy was adopted. Even today, broadcasts of the Thai Overseas Service cover three major geographical areas, namely Europe, Asia, and North America.[9] Programs are broadcast in French, English, Chinese, Malaysion, Laotian, Cambodian and Vietnamese.[10]

In 1953 the government added the Thai Rural Broadcasting Service as an aid to farmers in this largely agricultural nation.[11] In the sparsely populated river basins north of Bangkok, there was a need to inform the Thai farmers of the latest developments in agricultural technology. Schools had been tried and had been found largely unsuccessful due to the nomadic characteristics of the people. Also, in many cases they were not adequately staffed. The Rural Broadcasting Service provided the solution to the problem. It is now possible for an inexpensive transistor radio to be distributed to villages throughout the river basins and, as the farmers gather to receive the latest in news and agricultural information, an expert in agriculture speaks from a Bangkok studio.[12] Although transmitter power is somewhat low, plans for increased power are in the making as well as recruiting and training of experienced rural broadcasters.

Rounding out the Thai concept of radio broadcasting is the National Service, commonly referred to as Radio Thailand. It is Radio Thailand which reaches a majority of the population with a programming policy of entertainment and education. Radio Thailand also provides the "musical entertainment" programming such as we in the United States associate with our standard A.M. stations. Medium wave broadcasts service the many nationalities of the Thai citizenry with programs being heard in English, Thai, Chinese, French, Vietnamese, Malaysian, Khmer and Northeastern Thai.[13] Although government owned and controlled, Radio Thailand has the responsibility for its own administration and has approximately 200 persons employed in technical and program functions. On occasion, other governmental departments as well as the BBC and Voice of America exchange staff members. The present facilities of Radio Thailand, mostly financed through government subsidies, include over 29 transmitters scattered throughout the country and possessing a total power output of nearly 249 kilowatts.[14]

Radio broadcasting in Thailand is governed by the Radio Communications Act, the Public Relations Department being responsible for enforcement and the Post and Telegraph Department responsible for frequency allocation. Using the interests of "public safety and security"[15] as a guide, the Thailand Public Relations Department has undertaken the responsibility of controlling a large segment of program content. An important exercise of this control was felt in 1966 when the Public Relations Department stepped in and removed "commercials" and "messages for courting couples" from the 90 Army owned radio stations.[16] Rationale was that with the increased communist insurgency problems it was felt such commercials and courting messages could be used as coded messages by communist infiltrators.[17]

Commercial broadcasting is governed by the Thai Television Company Ltd. which is responsible for the administration of television as well as radio. The corporation, although a separate entity in itself, was formed by an act of the Ministry and remains under strong governmental influence. Also under the sphere of Thai Television Company Ltd. are other governmental departments operating commercial stations. These include the Agricultural Department, Chulalontkorn University, The Royal Household Bureau and the Ministry of Education.[18]

Today, fifty years after its beginning in 1919, radio broadcasting in Thailand utilizes A.M., F.M., and F.M. stereo multi-plex. Even in its "underdeveloped" status, Thailand's growth in broadcasting has been somewhat phenominal. Since its beginning, over 150 wavelengths have been allocated to stations broadcasting throughout the Thai Nation.[19]

Thai Television Channel 4

The decision to introduce television in Thailand was that of the Ministry. On June 24, 1954 one year prior to Thai television's official opening, a television signal was beamed to a Bangkok committee room and also to selected citizens in a nearby province. The committee voted its approval and television joined radio as a part of Thailand's system of mass communication. One week later Thai Television Company Ltd. undertook the task of planning and constructing Southeast Asia's first complex.[20] In 1956 Thai Television (T-TV Channel 4) went on the air. Since that time, T-TV has expanded its facilities to provide television for three outlying provinces. Reported in percentages, program content on Thai Television includes news, 19.7%; entertainment, 45%; education and public service, 22%; and commercials, 14%.[21] Of the major programming departments, news is the most active. The news department broadcasts forty-five minutes of news daily including instant coverage of international, national and local happenings. Wire services are also used including Associated Press, Reuter and United Press International. Due to its proximity to Vietnam, Bangkok, like Saigon, is becoming one of the world's major news capitals.

A unique feature of the news department is the Business News Service. Thailand, in its efforts to attract new business and foster national development has inaugurated a means of using the television medium to publicize new business enterprises. Any new company wishing to have an event covered by the T-TV news department, simply informs the station and for a fee of approximately 75 American dollars receives five minutes of prime television coverage. The fee is quite nominal, considering it is based on a "cost" or "break-even" figure for T-TV.[22]

Also important to the operation of Thai-TV is the Art and Design Department. Since film making facilities are limited in Thailand, much of the programming is "live". Weekly theatre programs of ninety to one-hundred minutes are not uncommon; thus the responsibility for theatre sets and stage settings keep the Art and Design Department busy. This lack of adequate films has also been the cause of a strong American programming influence. Such American suppliers as NBC, CBS, ABC, Warner Brothers, Four Star, 20th Century Fox and Columbia are regular producers of weekly Thai television shows.[23] Foreign residents who do not understand the Thai language may watch the American programs and listen to an English sound-track by tuning 96.5 on radio F.M., a special service frequency of T-TV.

Television has grown tremendously since its inception in 1956. A 1967 survey listed the viewing audience at 2,000,000 with over 250,000 television sets in the country.[24]

Viewed in perspective, the future of Thai television seems quite favorable. The government, advancing cautiously and with limited funds, is preparing for hookups with European networks. Perhaps, if international policies permit, the expansion will continue and eventually result in active cooperation between Europe and a Southeast Asian television system providing access to all the potentials of mass communication on the Asian mainland.

This paper has described the evolution of the Thai broadcasting system, an evolution that has given voice to the cultural and national characteristics of a people. Today the people of the Thai nation look upon the "mute" expanses of the Asian mainland with a view to bringing the rest of the Asian continent and the world closer to them through the medium of radio and television broadcasting. The task is formidable for the heterogeneous underdeveloped Thai nation. But there is a strong will on the part of the people and as McLuhan said, when referring to radio and the broadcasting mediums, they are "charged with resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums...with the power to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber.[25]

Footnotes

[1]Information obtained by the authors through correspondence with Khunying Ambhorn Meesook, Director of the Division of Educational Information, Bangkok, Thailand, January, 1968.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid. Phillips Electrical Company of Thailand Ltd. remains even today a major supplier of Thai broadcasting equipment.

[4]"Radio Will Soothe Convalescent King," The New York Times, May 9, 1931, p. 5.

[5]The New York Times, May 10, 1931, p. 10.

[6]Ibid., p. 2.

[7]The New York Times, May 17th, 1931, Section 9, p. 11.

[8]Information obtained by the authors through correspondence with Mr. Visit Ampaiworn, Director of Overseas Broadcasting, Bangkok, Thailand, January, 1968.

[9]The official broadcast contour map shows broadcasts also reaching Northern Africa as well as Northeastern Australia.

[10]Programming schedule of Thai overseas radio station HSK-9. The schedule notes the greatest percentage (29%) of programming time is devoted to English language broadcasts.

[11]The Asian Magazine, special supplement of the Bangkok Post, October 23, 1966, p. 23. About 75% of the population still live on farms or are nomadic. It should be noted, however, that since 1962 "agriculture has declined from 37.1 to 32.3 per cent...manufacturing increased from 11.4% to 12.2%...."

[12]Wilbur Schramn, writing in the draft of a Report to the International Institute for Educational Planning in 1965, noted that The United States Agency for International Development, The Colombo Plan and UNESCO had aided significantly in providing receiving sets and trained personnel for educational broadcasting in Thailand.

[13]Thailand, booklet provided the authors by the Royal Thai Embassy, Washington, D.C., p. 29. It also states that "Virtually the entire population listens to radio."

[14]Meesook.

[15]Meesook.

[16]The New York Times, September 25, 1966, p. 7.

[17]The government in northeast Thailand is also taking steps to increase power on Thai radio transmitters to counter signals being received from North Vietnam and Communist China. (Source: USIA Thailand Communications Factbook, p. 23.

[18]Broadcast training at Chulalontkorn University is under the direction of speech and drama departments. (Source: Meesook).

[19]Meesook.

[20]Information obtained by the authors through correspondence with Mrs. Ramyong Sakornpan of the T-TV 4 Programming and Sales Department.

[21]Thailand at a Glance (London: The Information Service of Thailand), 1967, p. 50.

[22]Bangkok World, June 24, 1967, special television supplement, p. 1.

[23]Ibid., p. 3.

[24]Thailand, (Royal Thai Embassy, Washington, D.C.), 1967, p. 29.

[25]Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, New York, (1964), p. 261.